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### Gomorrah: review

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*Gomorrah* (Matteo Garrone, Italy, 2008)

Self-satisfied middle-aged masculinity soused in blue neon, rough-and-ready camaraderie, the pampering and privileges associated with the good life, all soundtracked by the increasingly audible, unbroken hum of power: what *Gomorrah*'s opening scene sets up then swiftly, systematically puts down is less a few nameless, fictionalised Neapolitan gangsters and more the very real miasma of glamour popular cinema has bequeathed the Italian mafia. Early on in Matteo Garrone's accomplished movie we see two teenage would-be gangsters, Marco and Piselli, re-enacting Al Pacino/Tony Montana's histrionics at the climax of Brian de Palma's early-'80s remake of *Scarface*. *Gomorrah* ultimately reveals their naïve act of imitation and adulation as a mistake already containing its own fatal consequences. It is one the film itself is determined to avoid, forging instead its own clearly distinctive stylistic and moral path.

Thus, while the American tradition exemplified by *The Godfather* movies concentrates classically on the fate of those at the top of the tree, *Gomorrah* anatomises instead the situation of those scrabbling around in the dirt below: teenage foot soldiers, elderly bag men, sweatshop labourers. Canonical works like *Scarface* or *Goodfellas* typically display and provoke an intellectually and ethically illogical mix of horrified attraction, humanising the inhumane as organised crime is personified in the figures of cruel but charismatic capos. By contrast, *Gomorrah*'s multi-stranded narrative deliberately offers us no single (anti-)hero to tidily encapsulate a complex, far-reaching socio-economic system drenched in exploitation and violence or to part-redeem the latter through sheer force of personality. Films such as *Bugsy* or *Casino* beguile viewers with the equivocal idea of mob life as Faustian pact: sure, you sell your soul, but for a good stretch the terms and conditions seem good. *Gomorrah* depicts alternatively a culture where lives and morals are financially worthless but sacrificed, often enthusiastically, by their owners anyway. The film's world is awash with money ever changing hands but never staying in those that need or deserve it most. The Corleone myth presents organised crime as a peculiar species of intimate human bonding, however dysfunctional or perverted: in the final analysis, a *family*. *Gomorrah* despairingly portrays a contemporary Neapolitan culture in which essential bonds of kinship have become impossible to forge or sustain. Here, the closest ties of family and friendship are annihilated, not augmented, by the ubiquitous incursions of mafia culture. In *Gomorrah*'s world there is, to coin a phrase, nothing personal: only business.

This central idea, the breakdown of nuclear and extended family units and the disastrous obliteration of civil society that process portends, is carefully foregrounded by each of *Gomorrah*'s five central plot strands. Aspirant kingpins Marco and Piselli roam their neighbourhood like family pets going feral, their next-of-kin never seen nor mentioned; the wife and child of overworked tailor Pasquale, straining to bring an illicit, mob-funded haute couture contract in on time, are glimpsed but once in the film; Don Franco, the callous overseer of the local families' illegal disposal of astonishingly huge quantities of industrial waste shipped in from all over Italy and Europe, quite literally poisons the birthright of those forced to sell ancestral farmland at knock-down rates out of financial necessity; despite his mother's best efforts, thirteen-year-old Toto traces his imprisoned

father's descent into a life of drug trafficking and arbitrary executions; most of the homes visited by Don Ciro as he dispenses weekly monies in recognition of enduring loyalty to a particular mob family have either been broken (sons killed, fathers jailed) or will soon be so (families evicted by erstwhile criminal protectors, houses torched by rival gangs, mothers executed as internecine warfare spirals out of control)

Reflecting its depiction of a world in which the basic conditions for interpersonal relationships have been obliterated, *Gomorra* represents the labyrinthine workings of an incredibly powerful, entrenched criminal-economic system as much as the private identities of and ties between those caught up in the machine's workings. The film's distinctive, virtuoso camera style creates a strikingly paradoxical sense of intimate engagement with yet simultaneous alienation from onscreen places and protagonists. Nearly every scene is shot hand-held and in long take. This creates the visceral sense of immediacy we might associate with a journalistic dispatch from a war zone (which is in many ways what *Gomorra* is). Yet such formal choices also have the ability to distance viewers from what they see in other ways. They mitigate, for example, against the powerful, direct identification with character that so much classical narrative cinema forges, even when—as is so often the case in the gangster genre—we know that the Don whose identity and aspirations we temporarily don is clearly a monster. One can count the number of classically defined point-of-view shots in *Gomorra* on one hand. The first unambiguously clear one, when Toto is encased in a bullet-proof vest by a mobster about to shoot him as part of a grotesque ritual initiation into manhood, comes only forty minutes or so into the movie. The remarkable closeness we feel to *Gomorra*'s characters (even the most clearly sympathetic ones) is therefore of a very particular kind. Garrone's preference for ubiquitous, uncomfortably extreme facial close-up dictates that we nearly always witness protagonists' situations from (quite literally) right over their shoulders or under their noses. Yet we hardly ever see the same things directly through characters' eyes. We are thus right there yet not quite there with them at one and the same time.

Moreover, the occasional unmediated glimpse afforded of Toto's world from his perspective (a privilege never afforded to the lead characters of *Gomorra*'s four other main plot strands) is belatedly unveiled as a cruelly effective moral lesson. It serves ultimately to stress the necessary distance between ourselves and the film's world and its inhabitants, rather than, as one would normally expect of the point-of-view device, drawing us closer to these things. Unlike the initially innocent Toto, the central protagonists of other storylines—Pasquale, Don Ciro, Roberto, and Marco and Piselli—are all already imbricated, albeit to varying degrees, within the mafia system. All are aware to a greater or lesser extent of its absolute amorality. All are given some chance to reclaim their humanity through a mix of luck and personal courage. The fact that we see nothing directly from these men's point-of-view reflects the fact that none of them makes his ultimate ethical choice until towards *Gomorra*'s very end. The question of whether any or all move back towards the rest of us, to seeing the world once more as we see it and thus allowing us the chance to return the favour, is settled only at the last. By contrast, viewers can be allowed initial but illusory identification with Toto's point of view because youth dictates that his nascent humanity is still his only to lose. When he does relinquish it, sending a female adult friend to her death in order to remain a gang

member, the severing of the direct emotional connection *Gomorra* has briefly allowed us to make with him attains a truly savage impact. For all his intrinsic personal attractiveness and potential, it latterly becomes clear that Toto's moral fate, unlike that of the other, older, ostensibly more compromised central characters, was in fact always already sealed. The predestined trajectory of his adult life (however long it lasts) entails that we can no longer see, identify with or understand the world as it exists through his eyes.

Elsewhere, Garrone's distinctive (non-)use of depth of focus, closely related to his general privileging of a quasi-journalistic, hand-held, single take aesthetic, is also instrumental in advancing *Gomorra*'s unsettling moral analysis. It's noticeable how often the focal length of the director's lens refuses to lengthen or shorten in any given scene. An initial, single point of visual reference is suspended in stark clarity while everything and everyone else around it remains stubbornly blurred; we wait in vain for the refocusing either within a continuous take or achieved through the cut to another shot that would characterise a more conventional shooting style. Usually, this device connotes the near-total extent to which ties between people have collapsed under the weight of the endemic fear and mistrust characterising mafia hegemony. In a scene where Pasquale berates his boss, Mr Enzo, for losing the trust of his factory workforce through exploitative business practices, the two men are sharply in focus in the extreme foreground while the blurred outlines of the larger group of people Pasquale refers to are dimly visible in the background. The imbalance, like the ethical injustice Pasquale complains of, is never rectified within the sequence. The classically unorthodox nature of such visual effects is amplified through sheer force of repetition across the film as a whole. They express powerfully the unenviable place nearly all characters within *Gomorra* find themselves in, surrounded by, but utterly isolated from emotionally honest and fearless engagement with, their peers.

Such relatively detailed points about film form are worth making for two reasons. Granted, a large part of *Gomorra*'s impact stems from our inability to dismiss the journalistic veracity of the events, dilemmas and misdeeds the film lays before us, no matter how much their lurid inhumanity makes us want to. Yet Matteo Garrone does not rely unduly on this advantage. His intelligent, accomplished filmmaking choices entail that the full human tragedy of Neapolitan gang culture is felt emotionally as well as recorded realistically. Moreover, to note *Gomorra*'s careful avoidance of the classically lavish celluloid aestheticization of the mafia myth is not to pigeonhole the movie as a work that puritanically disavows the expressive pleasures and intellectual possibilities of cinematic style. As technically dazzling and formally considered as just about any generic predecessor you care to name, *Gomorra* simultaneously rethinks the moral murk that characterises both the gangster film and our enduring love of it. This is so in ways most previous mafia movies have either proved incapable of or plain uninterested in.

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